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### The Wars That Changed the World

Throughout world history, wars have marked the start and end of eras, shifts in global power dynamics, and radical changes to the world order such that the world could never be the same again. Eleven conflicts stand out above the rest as significant to the formation of the world as we know it today — the Greco-Persian Wars, the Punic Wars, the Mongol conquests, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the European conquest of the New World, the Seven Years' War, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the First and Second World Wars, and the Cold War. All of these wars irreversibly changed the course of world history.

The Greco-Persian Wars were a series of conflicts between the Greeks and the Persians in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.. These wars, though not particularly devastating by modern standards, prevented the downfall of the Western World as we know it today, which has its foundations in ancient Greece. Had the Persians won the Greco-Persian Wars, the world would certainly look vastly different to how it does today, given that Europe has influenced so much of world history, and their victory would possibly have totally prevented the rise of Europe as we know it. Had the Persians won the Greco-Persian Wars, the Persian Empire very well may have expanded into Europe and killed the idea of the West and Europe before it could truly begin with the Roman Empire, a sort of spiritual successor to Greek culture.

The Roman Empire was a major influence in Europe, even continuing through present day, and was cemented as a major political force during the Punic Wars. These wars, fought

between Ancient Rome and Carthage, a city-state in North Africa, decided the balance of power in the Mediterranean region. Carthage, which had previously dominated the region, was shockingly unseated by the seemingly less powerful Rome, a smaller city-state with a significantly weaker military. Because of its victory during the Punic Wars, Rome was able to grow into the Roman Republic, and later the Roman Empire, which has had undeniable impacts on the history of the world, in terms of architecture, language, culture, war, government, and everything in between. Had Rome lost to Carthage in the Punic Wars, Carthage could have expanded to the same power and influence level as the Roman Empire eventually did, which would have unknown effects.

Thousands of years later in Central Asia, the Mongols came to power through sheer numbers, impressive warfare tactics, and their ability to spread out across the Eurasian steppe due to their nomadic way of life. Throughout their time conquering much of the Eurasian landmass, the Mongols disturbed existing trade routes and created new ones, threatened existing empires and states, and assisted in the diffusion of both new technologies and deadly new diseases around the area.

Perhaps most significantly, the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 brought about the end of the Islamic Golden Age, which was a period during which much of the Middle East and the Muslim World was making rapid advancements in science and technology. This period was brought to an end by the Mongols, which meant that Europe would eventually take its place as the leader in science, technology, and learning after the Dark Ages. Essentially, thanks to the Mongols, the position was just waiting to be filled, and eventually it was filled by Europe, which would become the world leader in pretty much everything for much of history.

Toward the end of the Dark Ages, The Byzantine Empire – the last vestige of the once-great Roman Empire – was beginning to falter. Its neighbor, the Ottoman Empire, took advantage of its weakness and conquered the capital city of Constantinople, which defeated the Eastern Roman Empire once and for all. Along with this major power shift, many Byzantine scholars fled the city, bringing along classical Greek texts and other works of literature and history as they escaped to places like Italy. With this development, the Renaissance began in Europe, the dark ages ended, and a new age began.

With the fall of Constantinople and the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire, trade routes between Europe and Asia were broken. European leaders, eager to re-establish commerce with Asian states, began to fund naval expeditions in search of new maritime trade routes to China and India. One of these expeditions, funded by the Spanish monarchy and helmed by the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, unwittingly stumbled upon a “New World” across the Atlantic Ocean. The first European to reach the Americas since the Vikings in the 11th century, Columbus brought word back to the Spanish of the abundant natural resources of the New World, most notably food crops and silver.

Keen to extract more wealth from the Americas, the Spanish funded several more expeditions to the area, especially present-day Mexico and Central and South America. Thus began the Spanish conquest of the New World, which resulted in the utter decimation of American states like the Aztec Empire, widespread genocide of indigenous peoples, and immense economic growth for Spain, which, thanks to its colonies in the Americas, quickly became one of the world’s first true global colonial superpowers.

Inspired by Spain’s success in the New World, other European states – including Great Britain, France, and Portugal, among others – quickly followed in their footsteps, launching

expeditions to explore and stake a claim in the Americas. This era, known as the Age of Exploration, was marked by a rush by European powers to colonize the New World and use its resources to increase the power of their empires. Much like the Spanish conquest, this resulted in the devastation of indigenous American peoples and their way of life. While not a war so much as a genocide, native peoples did resist European invasion to some extent, though to little avail.

The Age of Exploration also ushered in an age of European colonialism. As more robust technologies and trade routes began to emerge, great European powers began to seize control of goods and occupy territories all around the world in the name of economic growth. The world quickly became a pie to be divided up among these states, which led to a sort of arms race between them. The ramifications of this scramble for territory are still seen in the world today.

As these European nations vied for control of American resources and territories, they inevitably came into conflict with one another. In 1756, mounting strife boiled over into outright war. This conflict – the Seven Years' War – pitted European powers against one another, both at home in Europe and in their colonial territories in North America. It resulted in an agreed-upon division of North American territory, which heavily favored the British, and would set the stage for the British development of North America, the American Revolution and the creation of the United States.

The American Revolution was one of the first of the Atlantic Revolutions – a series of rebellions that occurred across the Atlantic World in the late 18th and early 19th century. These revolutions, which generally sought to throw off the yoke of monarchy in favor of democracy, were inspired by new ways of thinking developed in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment. Perhaps the most impactful of these uprisings was the French Revolution.

Due to its involvement in the American Revolution, along with King Louis XVI's exorbitant spending, the French government was nearly bankrupt by the late 18th century. This, combined with increasing dissatisfaction with the monarchy, led many of the French people to rise up in open revolt against their government. Whereas most of the Atlantic Revolutions simply involved a colony or occupied territory declaring its independence, the French Revolution was the first to entirely wipe out the existing social structure of a long-standing state and replace it with something entirely new. This is also relatively unique as far as rebellions go because many power struggles simply end with a new leader sitting on the old throne. The French Revolution, however, led to the execution of many of France's former leaders, the total reformation of French politics and society, and a widespread movement to overthrow the old political order.

A military commander named Napoleon Bonaparte, who proved himself during the siege of the British-held port of Toulon seized power in France. Eventually, he was declared Emperor of the French, and vowed to maintain many of the freedoms won by the people during the French Revolution. His new title – and the new French government as a whole – was unpopular among other European leaders, many of them monarchs who sought to maintain the old political order and thereby refused to recognize his authority. Following a territorial dispute over Italy, which Napoleon crowned himself king of, an alliance known as the Third Coalition formed to stop Napoleon and his massive army, consisting of Britain, Russia, Austria, Naples, Sweden, and the Ottoman Empire.

A series of shocking military victories by Napoleon, culminating at the renowned Battle of Austerlitz, led to a decisive victory in the War of the Third Coalition, the first of the Napoleonic Wars. Over the decades that followed, six more wars would be fought with the aim

of defeating Napoleon, who would eventually face his downfall at the infamous Battle of Waterloo.

The Napoleonic Wars reshaped Europe, and led to the unification of Italy and Germany, which would have major repercussions in the early 19th century. Additionally, the damage done by Napoleon to many of the European powers, which were among the most powerful nations in the world at the time, led to undisputed British naval superiority and made it the most powerful empire in the world. Furthermore Napoleon's success can be partially attributed to his army, which was unprecedentedly large, well-trained, and well-equipped. Widespread conscription led to Napoleon amassing a truly gargantuan army, which stood in sharp contrast to the relatively small forces that had previously been used in war throughout most of history. This would set a precedent for future wars.

A little less than a century after Napoleon's crushing defeat at Waterloo, Europe was once again plunged into war. When Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian national in Sarajevo, then part of Austria-Hungary, Austria declared war on Serbia. Germany declared war on Russia, which had sided with Serbia, and its ally, France. Dominoes continued to fall as more European nations and their overseas colonial holdings became embroiled in what would become known as the Great War. Eventually, due in part to both the Zimmermann Telegram and the sinking of the Lusitania, the United States, an emerging global power, became involved. Before long, the war was truly a global war. It was the first conflict to involve every corner of the world. As globalization and colonialism had united the world like it had never been before, conflict spread to every corner of it.

It was not just a global war, however. It was also a total war, meaning that its belligerents used any means necessary to win. New, horrifying technologies and weapons of war were

implemented by all sides, including planes, tanks, heavy long-range artillery, improved machine guns, and poison gas. These new innovations made the old way of fighting obsolete. Gone were the days of brightly-colored uniforms, battlefield decorum, and firing lines. Now, soldiers trudged through thick mud in the thousands, charging an enemy trench under heavy machine gun fire. Massive armies were conscripted all across the board, almost all of which suffered previously unheard of numbers of casualties. The European landscape, especially on the trench-lined Western front, was devastated, pockmarked with artillery craters, lines of barbed wire, and mud.

In addition to reframing the way war is fought, however, the end of World War I marked the beginning of the end for many of the old European powers. France had been devastated. Britain had lost so many of its young men. Germany was crippled. The Ottoman Empire collapsed. The devastation they had endured, having lost much of their populations, in addition to being physically and economically devastated by battle, meant that nations that had previously been on the global periphery and remained relatively intact, like the United States, could rise up as real players on the world stage. It was the end of European colonialism as it had been for centuries.

After the end of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles humiliated and economically ruined Germany. This left the German people desperate and bitter, and made them more susceptible to listen when Adolf Hitler brought about the rise of the Nazi Party, a fascist movement that promoted German strength and purity, rearmament, and the creation of a unified German ethnic state. Britain and France, the supposed enforcers of the Treaty of Versailles, allowed Germany to build up its military without consequence, and even allowed it to annex Austria and the German ethnically-populated Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Fascism was also on the rise in Italy, under

the dictator Benito Mussolini, who aligned himself with Germany due to their similar aims. In Southeast Asia, the newly-industrializing Japan was expanding under an authoritarian nationalist government, seizing territory in China and throughout the South Pacific.

These mounting tensions came to war in 1939, when Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to split Poland under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Only then did Britain and France declare war on Germany. When the Japanese bombed the U.S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor, the U.S. entered the war and the world united under either the Allied or the Axis Powers.

Much like World War I, World War II was characterized by a total shift in the way wars were fought. There was an increased dependence on tanks, planes, and aircraft carriers, for land, air, and sea superiority, respectively. Massive bombing campaigns, made possible by new large-scale bombers, meant that the war was brought to civilians, instead of just being fought on the battlefield, as cities were bombed in droves. The use of the atomic bomb by the United States marked a shift in global warfare, also. Perhaps most significantly, however, WWII finally brought Britain and France to their knees and relegated them to secondary world power status. With their enemies defeated, the former allies – the United States and the Soviet Union, now irrevocably separated by opposing ideologies, began to come into conflict with one another.

As the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. began to expand their global spheres of influence and spread anti-communism and communism, respectively, they came into indirect conflict with one another during the Cold War, including proxy and semi-proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. Throughout most of the 20th century, these two global superpowers were locked in a stalemate, unable to directly go to war with one another because both had nuclear weapons and feared the concept of mutually assured destruction. With the gun of mutual nuclear annihilation pointed directly at them, these two behemoths had to challenge one another in other ways,

including the Space Race and sports, like the Olympics. War had become ingrained in everyday culture. It was no longer about winning on the battlefield, but about winning over other countries to your cause. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union took drastic measures to bring other countries, particularly in the so-called “Third World” under their spheres of influence. This pattern continues today. Now, diplomacy, covert ops, and proxy wars are how war changes the world.

Throughout world history, it is clear that war has the ability to totally shift political dynamics, create or destroy nations, and overall bring about massive change to the world order. War is a tool that has been used throughout history. It is a versatile implement of change – it can bring people together, or tear them apart. It can conquer or free nations. It can elevate or destroy empires. Some of the most significant developments in history have been brought about by war, like the European domination of the world, and that hegemony’s decline. War is often one of the first steps in the process of change. It is brutal, horrible, and nightmarish, but it has made the world what it is today.

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